### Class 1: Introduction

Our course starts in New York in the 1940s, but 35,000 years of recorded art history exist before this point. Before we touch down with both feet running, what should we be aware of, what lessons from the past can we take with us?

In this introductory class, we first look at a very few select pieces of work, from as old as the Venus figurine from Hohle Fels, made of Mammoth Ivory, up to a couple American works from 1950. Stretching them into a timeline, we discuss the spectrum from realism to abstraction, and discover realism encompasses a relatively small part of the history of art.

We examine what factors cause artists to return to abstraction in the 1800s, and how this trend continues up to the Abstract Expressionists. We also look at the differences between Formalism and Expressionism, asking what reasons artists would have to paint ugly or disturbing images. We end with Tomas Heart Benton’s heroic picture of American soldiers going off to World War II, a classic piece of American Realism. Next week, we will pick up with these soldiers returning from the end of the war, and see what happened when New York became the center of the art world.

### After this class you should be able to

#### Define the following:

* abstraction
* realism
* figurative abstraction
* representational abstraction
* non-representational abstraction
* expressionism
* formalism
* color field painting

#### Answer the following:

* What happened in the 1800s that caused painters to suddenly move from realism to abstraction?
* Who was Clement Greenberg, and what was his argument for abstraction in the essay "Towards a Newer Laocoon"?
* Who was Sartre, and what was his argument in "Existentialism?"

### Links for further reading:

* [Venus of Hohle Fels: Prehistoric Porn](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/14/venus-of-hohle-fels-prehi_n_203418.html)
* [A site dedicated to Clement Greenberg](http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/)
* Sartre's [Existentialism Is a Humaninsm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm) full text
* [The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation](http://www.albersfoundation.org/)

### essay question

Paradigm Shift  
: 1. fundamental change in the way of doing things, : 2. acceptance by a majority of a changed belief, attitude, or way of doing things

It is said that after World War II, world culture experienced a paradigm shift. Explain how Sartre’s statement that mankind is “condemned to be free” and his idea of “existential anguish” illustrate this new belief system. Explain how the work of the Abstract Expressionists can be seen as illustrating this paradigm shift.